The second and third Epistles of John

by

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The difference in spirit between the Old Testament and the New is reflected by the difference in form. Of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, twenty-one are letters, and of these fifteen are directed to particular churches or to individual believers; while the Gospel of Luke, the Acts, and the Apocalypse are prefaced with personal address, and the Gospel of John again and again sets writer and readers face to face. By the manner as well as by the substance of its teaching the New Testament is thus distinguished from all other sacred books. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, the apostles claim to speak by immediate inspiration of God, and set forth truth ordinarily in its relation to present needs, dealing with general principles in their application to particular instances. They differ from the prophets in two important respects: (*a*), The prophets commonly spoke to the nation; the apostles speak to the individual church, or believer. The state held the foremost place in antiquity; Christ gave the foremost place to man. Many of his profoundest teachings were addressed to a single hearer. (*b*), Generally speaking, antagonism marked the attitude of the prophets toward Israel; fellowship marks the attitude of the apostles toward the church. The prophets were sent to a people wayward and rebellious, and the burden of their message was warning and judgment; the apostles ministered to those "who have obtained the like precious faith with us." (2 Peter i. 1) This change of relation is characterized by a new spirit of freedom and familiarity of personal intimacy and affection, such as becomes the intercourse of brethren.[1]

Among the apostolic writings none are more thoroughly individual in character and style than those of John. The Gospel throbs throughout with the passionate ardor of the son of thunder. Unlike the earlier Gospels, the narrative is interwoven with the comments of the evangelist, so that it is sometimes diffi-

[1] See Bernard's *Progress of Doctrine in N. T.*, Lecture VI.

cult to distinguish the words of the speaker from the reflections of the writer. John nowhere names himself, but it is evident that he maintains his reserve with difficulty, and as the story draws to its close, he can restrain himself no longer, and comes forward to bear his personal testimony. (John xix. 35; xx. 30, 31; xxi. 24, 25.) The Gospel and the Epistles are closely knit together, and widely as the Gospel and Apocalypse differ in form, they are one in doctrine, and bear the marks of the same hand.

The interest of the Second and Third Epistles is not dogmatic, but historical. They throw a clear and beautiful light upon the old age of the beloved disciple, and they are almost the only memorials of the Christian church which have come down to us from the closing years of the first century.[1]

That these letters were written by the apostle is attested by sufficient evidence. They are contained in the most ancient manuscripts: the Vatican and the Sinaitic, of the fourth century; the Alexandrian, of the fifth, and the greater part of the Third Epistle is preserved among the fragments of Codex Ephraem, of the fifth century.

With a single exception, they are found in the most ancient versions: the old Latin, probably of the second century, and the Vulgate, of the close of the fourth; the Egyptian Memphitic and Thebaic versions, of the second and third century; the Ethiopic of the fourth or fifth; and the Armenian, of the fifth. Of the Gothic version of Ulfilas, of the fourth century, a large part has been lost; but as the translation of the New Testament was made from the Greek, we may presume that it contained all the catholic epistles, though no portion of any of them has been recovered.

The sole exception to the witness of the early versions is the Syriac Peshito, which represents the canon of the Syrian church at the earliest period of which we have knowledge, probably not later than the second century, whatever may be the date at which the Peshito assumed its present form. Of the catholic

[1] From the destruction of Jerusalem in 70, to the close of the century, the only writings of the Christian church that remain to us, besides the writings of John, are the Epistle of Clement, of Rome, to the Corinthians, and perhaps the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas. Some authors add the Gospel of Luke. See Plummer's *Commentary*.

epistles, it omits Second Peter, Second and Third John, and Jude, together with the Apocalypse. The attempt is made to break the force of this testimony by showing that these epistles are quoted by early Syrian writers. This, it is urged, indicates that the Peshito does not represent the Syriac canon in its original form, but is a later revision, from which these epistles have been excluded on critical grounds. Theophilus of Antioch (A. D. 175), Malchion (A. D. 275), and Pamphilus (A. D. 300) are cited as making use of certain of these epistles; but, as they were all familiar with Greek, they cannot be relied upon as witnesses to the native Syrian canon.

The stress of the argument is laid upon the witness of Ephraem Syrus, of the fourth century. It is affirmed that he quotes from all the catholic epistles, and as he was not acquainted with Greek, he clearly attests that they were contained in the Syriac canon of his time, and must originally have had a place in the Peshito. (See Hug, *Introd. to N. T.*, § 65.) The argument, however, is highly precarious. (*a*), It is said that Ephraem's citations from these epistles are found, with the exception of a possible reference to Second Peter, only in the Greek translation of his writings, of which the trustworthiness is doubtful. (Westcott, *Canon of the New Testament*, Part III., Chap. II., p. 444.) (*b*), It cannot be shown that Ephraem was entirely unacquainted with Greek. Sozomen (*Hist. Eccles.*, III., 16) says that he was ignorant of Grecian learning, and Theodoret bears the same testimony. (*Hist. Eccles.*, IV., 26.) The *Life of Basil*, ascribed to Amphilochius (Migne, 73, 60), says that in visiting Basil Ephraem conversed with him through an interpreter. But that he was unable to converse in Greek is no evidence that he was totally ignorant of the language; and he occasionally makes use of Greek words in his writings. (See article in Smith & Wace's *Dict. of Christian Biography.*) (*c*), And further, if the citations may be trusted, and if he was wholly ignorant of Greek, he may have obtained his knowledge of these epistles through Syrian versions of later date than the Peshito, or from an interpreter, or from friends. Add to this the extreme improbability that writings once received should afterwards have been excluded from

the canon at a time when they had won general recognition throughout the church, and we cannot avoid the conclusion that the native Syrian canon did not contain these books.

This conclusion is confirmed by Chrysostom, who makes use of three catholic epistles only. Amphilochius, Bishop of Iconium (A. D. 380), and Junilius (A. D. 550) attest that in their times opinions in the Syrian church were divided. Cosmas Indicopleustes (sixth century) says that the Syrian church received only three catholic epistles; but his account is full of inaccuracies. So late as the thirteenth century, Ebed Jesu, Bishop of Nisibis, included three catholic epistles only in his catalogue of New Testament writings. It is plain that the native Syrian, as distinguished from the Greek, church did not receive Second and Third John when the Peshito was framed.

The Muratorian canon, probably of the second century, quotes from the First Epistle of John and afterwards speaks of two epistles of John. The reference is probably to I. and II., though it may be to II. and III. Irenæus, near the close of the second century, quotes II. 7, 8, and refers the passage to the first epistle. (*Adv. Haer.*, iii. 16, 8.) Again, he cites II. 10, 11 as the words of John, the disciple of the Lord. (*Id.* i. 16, 3.) Clement, of Alexandria, about the same time, refers to the *larger* Epistle of John. (*Strom.*, ii. 15.) Eusebius says of Clement that "he has given in the *Hypotyposes* abridged accounts of all canonical Scripture, not omitting the disputed books. I refer to Jude and the other catholic epistles, and Barnabas, and the so-called apocalypse of Peter." (*Hist. Eccles.*, vi. 14.) This statement is confirmed, so far as the catholic epistles are concerned, by Photius of the ninth century (*Codex*, 109); and Cassiodorus, of the eighth century, says that Clement commented on I. and II. John.

Origen, in the third century, in his *Homilies on Joshua vii.*, extant only in the Latin translation, says that John sounded the trumpet in his epistles. He made no use of II. and III.; and Eusebius says, that in the fifth book of his *Expositions of John's Gospel*, Origen referred to the Gospel and Apocalypse as the work of John, and added, "He has left also an epistle of very few lines; perhaps, also, a second and third; but not all consider them gen

nine, and together they do not contain a hundred lines. (*Hist. Eccles.*, vi. 25.) In the seventh council of Carthage (A. D. 256) Aurelius, bishop of Chullabi, quoted II. 10, 11 as the words of John the apostle. (Routh, *Rel. Sacr.*, iii. 130.) Dionysius of Alexandria, in the third century, arguing that the Apocalypse is not the work of the apostle "by whom the Gospel of John and the catholic epistle were written," finds proof in the fact that John never names himself in his writings, as the author of the Apocalypse does. "But the evangelist did not prefix his name even to the catholic epistle. . . . But neither in the reputed Second or Third Epistle of John, though they are very short, does the name John appear; but there is written the anonymous phrase, 'the elder.'" (Euseb., *Hist. Eccles.*, vii. 25.) This is often cited as evidence that Dionysius accepted these epistles as John's; but considering how slight is the reference to II. and III., in contrast to the emphasis laid throughout the passage upon I., though the minor epistles would equally serve his purpose, and further the distinction indicated by the term *reputed*,[1] we must admit that he followed his master Origen, and regarded them as doubtful.

Alexander of Alexandria (A. D. 325), cites II. 10, 11, as the words of the blessed John. (Socrates, *Hist. Eccles.*, i. 6.) Eusebius, of the fourth century, says that John in his epistles does not name himself, or calls himself elder, never apostle or evangelist. (*Demonst. Evang.*, iii. 5.) In his *History* (iii. 25) he says: "Among the disputed writings, which are, nevertheless, recognized by many, are extant the so-called Epistle of James and that of Jude, also the Second Epistle of Peter, and those that are called the Second and Third of John, whether they belong to the evangelist or to another person of the same name." (Comp. *Id.* iii. 24.) Jerome, at the close of the fourth century and the opening of the fifth, ascribes the second epistle (Letter cxxiii. 12), and again both epistles (Letter liii. 8; cxlvi. 1) to the Apostle John. Elsewhere he notes that both epistles "are said to be the work of John the presbyter, to the memory of whom another sepulchre is

[1] The word does not of itself necessarily convey the idea of doubt. It is the connection that gives it that force here.

shown at Ephesus to the present day, though some think that there are two memorials of this same John the evangelist." (*De Vir. Ill. c. g.*; comp. c. 18.)

That both epistles were generally accepted by the church as the work of John, the apostle, after the time of Eusebius, is attested by Athanasius (*Festal Letters*, 39), by Augustine (*Christian Doctrine*, II., 8), by Gregory Nazianzen (cited by Westcott, *Canon of N. T. App. D.*), by Cyril of Jerusalem (*Catechet. Lect.*, iv. 36), by Philastrius (*Haer.*, 86), by Epiphanius (*Haer.*, 76), and by the Councils of Laodicea (A. D. 363) and Carthage (A. D. 397). These witnesses cover the latter half of the fourth century. A thousand years later, doubts of the apostolic authorship of the epistles were revived by Erasmus, who attributed them to John the presbyter, and has been followed by many scholars. (See Ebrard on *Epistles of John.*)

Thus it appears that among ante-Nicene writers the second epistle is attested by Irenæus, the Muratorian canon, Clement of Alexandria, Aurelius, and Alexander of Alexandria. For the third epistle there is no explicit testimony, though it may have been among the catholic epistles on which Clement of Alexandria commented. No other writing of the New Testament is so slenderly supported by external evidence. That is not surprising, in view of the private, personal character of the letter; and it is worthy of note that the only portion of the *second* epistle cited by ante-Nicene writers is the single passage that might serve a controversial purpose (verses 7–11). Routh has stated the case correctly: "I must acknowledge that I have met with no ante-Nicene writer, perhaps because of the brevity of the epistle, who has made use of the third epistle without at the same time, after making mention of it, adding his own doubt, or that of others at least, regarding the genuineness of this and the second epistle." (*Rel. Sacr.*, i., 423.)

If we turn to consider the evidence which the epistles themselves afford, we observe, (*a*), That they are evidently from the same hand. They present the same title, the same mode of address, the same conclusion, the same style throughout. Jerome aptly styled them "twin sisters." (*b*), It is plain that they are

the work of the writer of the first epistle. They are marked by the same style, and, in a large degree, by the same forms of expression. The smaller letters apply to individual cases the principles which the larger letter affirms. The false teachers denounced in the second epistle belong to the class described in the first (chapter iv. 1, 2, 3; ii. 26), and specific directions are given for their treatment by believers. In the third epistle the love of the brethren and the practical expression of it, which fill so large a space in the first letter, are commended in a particular instance. (*c*), It is further evident that the first epistle is nearly related to the Gospel, so that the three epistles and the Gospel are manifestly the work of the same hand.[1]

That these letters were not the work of a forger is plain, apart from the difficulty of counterfeiting the most intensely individual style which the New Testament presents; for what could be the motive of fabricating a writing with no dogmatic or controversial interest to serve? And what forger would adopt an ambiguous title, or represent the authority of the apostle whose place he sought to assume as openly defied and resisted within the church?

The main objections urged against the apostolic authorship of these epistles are three in number:

(*a*), The title *presbyter* is said to distinguish the writer from the apostle. Papias, speaking of the sources from which he derived the material for his *Expositions of Oracles of the Lord*, says: "If, then, any one came who had been a follower of the elders, I questioned him in regard to the words of the elders—what Andrew or what Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the disciples of the Lord, and what things Aristion and the presbyter John, the disciples of the Lord, say." (Euseb. *H. E.* iii. 39.) Eusebius interprets Papias as making a clear distinction between John the Presbyter and John the Apostle, and it is

[1] For a comparison of the three epistles with the Gospel, see *Speaker's Commentary*, Introduction to second edition, note; and DeWette, *Introduction to the New Testament*, § 180, b. For a comparison of the first epistle and the Gospel, see DeWette, § 177, a; Weiss, *Introduction to New Testament*, §§ 42–45, note 1.

difficult to attach any other meaning to his words. Many scholars maintain that Eusebius is mistaken, that Papias speaks of one John only, the apostle, and that there is no evidence of the existence of the presbyter. (See article in Smith and Wace, *Dictionary of Christian Biography*, "John the Presbyter." Farrar, *Early Days of Christianity*, excursus XIV. Schaff, *Church History*, ii. 697, note.) But to deny the distinction is to do violence to the words of Papias; and that the presbyter does not appear elsewhere in history is accounted for by the overshadowing reputation of the apostle. What do we know of Aristion, whom Papias sets side by side with the presbyter, as of equal authority, for "he mentions them frequently by name, and gives their traditions in his writings"? (Euseb. *Hist.* iii. 39.) Yet the memory of them both is preserved only in this passage of Papias. A reminiscence of the presbyter may, perhaps, be found in Dionysius of Alexandria, of the third century, who gave his opinion that the author of the Apocalypse was not the apostle, "but some other one of those in Asia, as they say that there are two monuments in Ephesus, each bearing the name of John." (*Id.* vii 25.)[1] It may further be noted that a passage in the Apostolic Constitutions, probably of the fourth century, names among the bishops ordained by the apostles "of Ephesus, Timotheus, ordained by Paul; and John, by me John." (vii. 46.) We may, therefore, regard the separate identity of John the presbyter as probable, though it cannot be established with certainty.

The earliest distinct suggestion that the second and third epistles may be ascribed to the presbyter is due to Jerome. In a passage already cited, they "are said to be the work of John the presbyter, to the memory of whom another sepulchre is shown at Ephesus to the present day, though some think that there are two memorials of this same John the Evangelist." (*De Vir., Ill. c. g.*; compare chapter 18.) Considering, however, how closely these epistles are linked with the first, and that the title *presbyter* was as aptly worn by John as by Peter (1 Peter v. 5), and giving due weight to the external evidence, we need have no hesitation in attributing both epistles to the apostle. That they found a place

[1] Compare Jerome *De Vir. Ill. c. g.*, cited above.

in the canon is most readily explained upon the assumption that the church regarded them as his, and their position among the catholic epistles is probably due to the recognition of their relation to the first epistle.

The term *presbyter* is commonly employed in the New Testament as a title of authority, and in that sense it should be understood here. John assumes an official title because he asserts official authority. Why this particular title was chosen cannot be determined, though it may have been to designate a closer relation to the individual church and its members than the broader term *apostle*.

(*b*), The second objection is drawn from the passage relating to false teachers (II. 7–10), which is said to be inconsistent with the character of John, and even with the spirit of Christianity. But it should be observed that those of whom he speaks are false *teachers*, engaged in the specific work of propagating error; that their error is fundamental, threatening destruction to the faith; that they had once been in fellowship with the church, but had gone out from it and cut themselves off from the communion of saints (I. ii., 19), and that they were characterized not merely by intellectual error, but by moral perversity, as is indicated by the terms liar (i. 2–22), deceiver, anti-Christ. To welcome the teacher is to give countenance to his doctrine, and to further his work. Moreover, John uses language as severe in his First Epistle. (I. ii. 18–27; iv. 1–6.) To love truth is to hate falsehood. To love men is to hate the error that destroys them. It is truth that constitutes the bond of fellowship, truth that gives loveliness to life. He loves "in truth," "for the truth's sake." (II. 1; III. 1.) And if this be not in accord with the spirit of Christ, what shall be said of Paul? "Though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach unto you any gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be anathema. As we have said before, so say I now again, if any man preacheth unto you any gospel other than that which ye received, let him be anathema." (Gal. i. 8, 9; compare Gal. v. 12; 2 Cor. xi. 4, 13–15.) Peter (II. ii. 1–3) and Jude (4) speak with equal plainness, and Christ himself scourged the false teachers of his time with words of righteous wrath: thieves and

robbers, hirelings, hypocrites, serpents, offspring of vipers, sons of hell.[1]

(*c*), It is said to be highly improbable that the authority of the apostle should be defied within the church. But it is easier to explain the conduct of Dictrephes as a fact than as a forgery, for who would fabricate so strange a tale? It has been shown that there is no reason to attribute the epistle to the presbyter. It was the work of the apostle, or of an imitator who reproduced his characteristic modes of thought and speech with marvellous skill but without apparent motive.

We conclude without hesitation from this review of the evidence that the Second and Third Epistles were written by the Apostle John, probably in the closing years of his life at his home in Ephesus.

Let us turn to consider the consider the contents of the letters:

II. The question to whom the Second Epistle is addressed is variously answered. Is the term *lady* (κυρία) to be literally or figuratively interpreted? Does the apostle address an individual or a church?

(*a*), Some suppose that by κυρία is meant the universal church. (*Jerome Letters*, cxxiii. 12.) But this the personal tone of the letter forbids: the reference to *certain of thy children* (4), the purpose *to come unto you and to speak face to face* (12), and the greeting of *the children of thine elect sister* (13).

(*b*), Many scholars interpret the word as indicating a particular church, and the churches of Jerusalem, Ephesus, and Corinth are among those that have been suggested. It is argued that no individual could be said to be loved of *all them that know the truth* (1); but why not? Demetrius is said to have *the witness of all men, and of the truth itself* (III. 12); and Paul speaks of *the brother whose praise in the gospel is spread through all the churches.* (2 Cor. viii. 18.) It is further urged that συνεκλεκτή in 1 Peter v. 13 designates a church, and that the same meaning should be assigned to ἐκλεκτῇ here. It is doubtful, however, whether that is the true sense of the word in that passage, and in any case it can

[1] See the story of the meeting of John with Cerinthus in the bath. (Euseb. *H. E.*, iii. 28; iv. 14; compare *Teaching of Twelve Apostles*, xi.

only be shown that the term is appropriate to a church, as Romans xvi. 13 shows that it is appropriate to an individual.

(*c*), As there is no reason to forsake the natural and obvious meaning of the word, we conclude that the letter was written to a Christian matron and her children. The question then arises, Is she addressed by name? And again various answers are returned.

(*a*), In a fragment preserved by Cassiodorus, Clement of Alexandria remarks, "The Second Epistle of John, which is written to virgins, is very simple. It was written to a Babylonian lady, by name Electa, and indicates the election of the holy church." As no instance has been found of the use of *Electa* as a proper name at this time, and as it is highly improbable that two sisters should bear the same name (13, *τῆς ἀδελφῆς σου τῆς ἐκλεκτῆς*), this opinion has no support and few supporters.

(*b*), It is maintained that her name was Electa Cyria. But to this the same objections apply. (W. and H. give *ἐκλεκτῇ κυρίᾳ* in the text, with *Ἐκλεκτῇ κυρίᾳ* in the margin.)

(*c*), Many scholars render, *to elect Cyria*, and without doubt that is the name, if the name is given. A serious grammatical difficulty lies in the way. We should certainly expect *κυρίᾳ τῇ ἐκλεκτῇ*, as we find in III. 1, *Γαΐῳ Γῷ ἀγαπητῷ*. On the other hand, the name was usually employed in correspondence; the name *Cyria* was in use at the time (Lücke on the Epistles of John); and the omission of the article with *κυρία* is more easily accounted for if it is a proper noun. (Winer, *New Testament Grammar*, § 18, 6, note 4.)

(*d*), It is held that no name is given, and that *κυρία* signifies lady, a term which Epictetus says was applied to women from their fourteenth year. (Euchir. 62.) The article may be omitted, it is suggested, because, following the analogy of *κύριος*, *κυρία* is regarded grammatically as a proper name. The choice lies between *a* or *the elect lady* and *elect Cyria*. The American revisers would place *Cyria* in the margin; their judgment should be accepted, and then it remains an open question whether text and margin should not exchange places.

The term *elect* signifies in general *chosen of God;* when spe-

cially applied to an individual, it designates him as distinguished for Christian gifts and graces. To a woman of this character and to her children the letter is addressed with words of cordial greeting: "Whom I love in truth; and not I only, but also all they that know the truth." Fellowship in the truth is the true fellowship of love. The purpose of the letter is to warn them against certain false teachers. Error follows always upon the heels of truth. A definite body of truth is recognized. The main doctrines of the Christian faith have been clearly defined, and the believer is in possession of a standard wherewith to "prove the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world." (1 John iv. 1.) This truth is traced to Christ, "the teaching of Christ." (2 John 9.) It proceeds from him whether he speaks in his own person or through his apostles, as God spake in old time through the prophets. During his earthly ministry he *began* both to do and to teach (Acts i. 1); he continues his work in the ministry of men inspired by his Spirit, so that the Book of the Acts is the gospel of the risen Christ. (Comp. Heb. ii. 3: "How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation? which having at the first been spoken through the Lord, was confirmed unto us by them that heard.") This truth is not merely an intellectual creed; it is the law of life in which men must walk. (2 John 4; 3 John 3, 4.) The gospel is both creed and commandment. Doctrine issues in duty, and the end of the commandment is love. (Comp. Rom. xiii. 10; 1 Tim. i. 15.) The commandment is one (2 John 5), but it branches into many commandments (2 John 6) as it is applied to the varying circumstances of life. It is as old as the law of Moses. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second like unto it is this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hangeth the whole law and the prophets." (Matt. xxii. 38–40. R. V.) While Jesus thus recognized that the central principle of the Mosaic law was love, he enjoined it upon his disciples as a new commandment. (John xiii. 34; xv. 12.) In the light of his life and death love has a new measure, a new motive, a new example, "Even as I

have loved you, that ye also love one another." (John xiii. 34.) (Comp. "As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you." John xvi. 9.) Love and obedience are united. Mark the reciprocal relation, "This is love, that we should walk after his commandment"; "This is the commandment . . . . that ye should walk in (love)" (2 John 6). Love is the motive of obedience, obedience is the fruit of love. Obedience is love in action.

The teaching of Christ marks the limits of thought and life which it is not lawful to transgress. All spiritual truth is the unfolding of his word though his Spirit, whose office it is to lead men into all truth by testifying of him; all true life is obedience to his commandments. "Whosoever goeth onward," oversteps this boundary, "and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God."[1] To forsake the word of Christ is to turn away from God, for "he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God" (John iii. 34), and "he that is of God heareth the words of God." (John viii. 47.) The condition of progress is abiding in the truth. *Μὴ ὑπὲρ ἃ γέγραπται*—not beyond what is written—is the law that Paul enjoins. (1 Cor. iv. 6.) The principle has a special application to those gnostic teachers who boasted of their superior knowledge, while yet they knew not the deep things of God, but the depths of Satan. (Rev. ii. 24.) Their error was vital because it concerned the person of Christ. There are three truths regarding him which John teaches in his first epistle that men must believe: 1. That he is the Christ. "Who is the liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ?" (Chap. ii. 22.) "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is begotten of God." (Chap. v. 1.) 2. That he is come in the flesh. "Every spirit which confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God; and every spirit which confesseth not Jesus is not of God." (Chap. iv. 2.) 3. That he is the Son of God. "Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God abideth in him, and he in God." (Chap. iv. 15.) "Who is he that overcometh the world, but he

[1] Some render *προάγων* by *goeth before*, *taketh the lead* (Revised Version, margin), sets himself up as a teacher. The received text has *παραβαίνων* (Authorized Version, *transgresseth*), probably an early gloss, conveying a correct interpretation.

that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?" (Chap. v. 5.) To lead men to this faith is the purpose of the gospel. "These are written that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name." (John xx. 31.)

The false teachers whom John here condemns denied that Jesus Christ cometh in the flesh. The present participle (ἐρχόμενον; in I., iv. 2, ἐληλυθότα) may be chosen to call attention, not to the simple fact, but rather to the abiding nature of the incarnation. He not only became man, he continues to be God and man in two natures and one person forever.[1] This dual nature these men denied. Denial of the true humanity of Christ was one of the characteristic errors of gnosticism. That this subtle form of heresy took its rise in apostolic times is evident from the Epistle to the Colossians (see Lightfoot), 1 and 2 Timothy, 1 John, and the Apocalypse.[2] Assuming as a fundamental principle that matter is intrinsically evil, and that God can have no contact with it, the gnostics were forced to deny the divinity or the true humanity of Christ. If he be God he cannot take to himself a material body. Sometimes his body was held to be only a phantom, a spectral form, assumed simply to render him visible to the eyes of men. Cerinthus, a contemporary of John, taught that Jesus was "the Son of Joseph and Mary, according to the ordinary course of human generation, while he, nevertheless, was more righteous, prudent, and wise than other men. Moreover, after his baptism Christ descended upon him in the form of a dove from the Supreme Ruler, and then he proclaimed the unknown Father and performed miracles. But at last Christ departed from Jesus, and then Jesus suffered and rose again, while Christ remained impassible, inasmuch as he was a spiritual being." (Irenæus, *Adv. Haer.*, i. 26.) (Comp. Hippolytus, *Refutation* vii. 21; Euseb. *Hist.*, iii. 28.[3]) Thus he maintained that

[1] See Westcott on *Epistles of John;* additional note, I., iii. 5.

[2] "When the blood of Christ was but lately shed, and the apostles were still in Judea, the Lord's body was asserted to be a phantom."—*Jerome Adv. Lucif.* 23.

[3] Irenæus says that John wrote his Gospel to refute Cerinthus and his predecessors, the Nicolaitans, while curiously enough within the next century both the Gospel and the Apocalypse were ascribed to Cerinthus. (Euseb. *Hist.*, vii. 25; see article *Alogi* in Smith and Wace.)

it was the man Jesus, not the God-man Jesus Christ, who suffered and died, because the divine and the human were merely associated for a time, not united in one person in him. Jesus came in the flesh, but not Jesus Christ. That this was felt by the early church to be a matter of vital importance many witnesses attest. Ignatius, whom a late tradition represents as a pupil of John, insists with vehement earnestness upon the reality of the passion. "But if it were, as certain persons who are godless, that is, unbelievers, say, that he suffered only in semblance, being themselves mere semblance, why am I in bonds? and why, also, do I desire to fight with wild beasts? So I die in vain. Truly, then, I lie against the Lord." (Trall. 10.) (Comp. Ephes. inscription, Trall. 9, with Lightfoot's notes; Magnes. 11, Smyrn. 2, 6; Polycarp to the Phil. vii.) Irenæus remarks: "Matthew might certainly have said, 'Now the birth of *Jesus* was on this wise'; but the Holy Ghost, foreseeing the corrupters (of the truth), and guarding by anticipation against their deceit, says by Matthew, 'But the birth of *Christ* was on this wise'; and that he is Emmanuel, lest perchance we might consider him as a mere man, ... and that we should not imagine that Jesus was one and Christ another, but should know them to be one and the same." (*Adv. Haer.*, iii. 16, 2.)

In thus denying either the divinity of Jesus or the humanity of Christ, gnosticism broke away from historical Christianity. It rejected the testimony of evangelists and apostles, and swept away the foundation of faith. Christianity is a historical religion. Its great doctrines are facts, attested by witnesses chosen of God. His disciples proved that he was both God and man, by showing that the prophecies relating to the Messiah were fulfilled in him, and by setting side by side the divine and the human features of his character and life. John testified that he was the eternal Word, because in him appeared the attributes of God; he testified that he became flesh, because we have heard, we have seen with our eyes, we beheld, and our hands handled the Word of life. (1 John i. 1.) He leaned upon the Master's breast; saw the blood and water that flowed from his wounded side; ate with him after he rose from the dead. This testimony gnosticism set

aside, yet sought to retain the Christ of faith while rejecting the Christ of history, to keep the truth while denying the fact, to preserve the fruits of faith while destroying the roots.[1]

Moreover, to deny the dual nature of Christ is to set aside his atoning work. The Redeemer is the God-man. His humanity made it possible for him to suffer; his divinity gave infinite value to his suffering. If he were only God, he could not die; if he were only man, his death could not avail. The price of redemption is the blood of the Son of God.[2] If it was only the man Jesus that hung upon the cross, he may be a martyr, an example; he is not a Saviour.

Those who bring this doctrine, denying that Jesus Christ cometh in the flesh, John condemns in unsparing terms. They reject the cardinal truth of Christianity. They are deceivers of men, enemies of Christ. Believers must hold no fellowship with them, lest they be corrupted, and lose the reward promised to the faithful.[3] The term "antichrist" is peculiar to John, who uses it only in his epistles. (1 John ii. 18, 22; iv. 3; 2 John 7.) He speaks of many antichrists. Every one is antichrist who denies that Jesus is the Christ, or that he is come in the flesh. Whether the

[1] Observe the singular reading, λύει for μὴ ὁμολογεῖ, in 1 John iv. 3. So W. H., in margin. Margin of Revised Version, *annulleth;* Vulgate, *solvit.* Socrates says that it was found in the ancient copies, and adds: "The mutilation of this passage is attributable to those who desired to separate the divine nature from the human economy, or, to use the very language of the early interpreters, some persons have corrupted this epistle, aiming at 'separating the manhood of Christ from his deity.' But the humanity is united to the divinity in the Saviour, so as to constitute, not two persons, but one only." (*Hist. Eccles.*, vii. 32.) This reading is attested also by Irenæus (*Haer.*, iii. 16, 8), by Tertullian (*Adv. Marc.*, v. 16), by Origen (on Matthew xxv. 14, Latin translation), by Augustine (*in loco*), and by Cassian (*Seven Books on the Incarnation*, v. 10). Lightfoot (*Essays on Supernatural Religion*, 118, note) and Farrar (*Early Days of Christianity, in loco*) incline to accept it. It is probably an ancient gloss, and indicates the sense in which the early church understood the words of the apostle.

[2] Acts xx. 28: "The church of *God*, which he purchased with his blood." (So W. H. and Revised Version, text. Many authorities for θεοῦ read κυρίου.) The phrase *blood of God* is used by Ignatius (Ephes. i.), by Tertullian (*Ad Uxor.* ii. 3), and the *blood of God the Son* by Clement of Alexandria (*Quis Div. Salv.* c. 34). "Permit me to be an imitator of the passion of my God." (Ignatius, Rom. vi.)

[3] "If any man walketh in strange doctrine, he hath no fellowship with the passion." (Ignatius, Phil. iii.)

spirit of antichrist shall finally be embodied in a single person or power, as Paul teaches, John in his epistles neither affirms nor denies; but he refers to the coming of the antichrist as a truth already familiar to his readers: "As ye heard that antichrist cometh" (1 John ii. 18); "This is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come" (1 John iv. 3): and his teaching must, therefore, be interpreted in harmony with that of Christ and of Paul. The several antichrists are types and organs of the antichrist who is to come; and the Apocalypse shows that the ultimate representative of the spirit of antichrist shall be a person or power in whom the might of Satan shall be concentrated, and in whom it shall be destroyed. There are many false prophets (1 John iv. 1; Matt. xxiv. 5, 24; Mark xiii. 6), yet there is one false prophet. (Rev. xiii. 11–18; xix. 20.) Antichrist is many, yet one, and in this regard his kingdom is the counterfeit of the church of Christ, which consists of many members with one head, animated by one spirit, and forming one body. (1 Cor. xii. 12.)

III. The third epistle is addressed to Gaius, or in the Latin form Caius. Three persons of this name are mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament: (*a*), A man of Macedonia, Paul's companion in travel. (Acts xix. 29.) (*b*), Gaius, of Derbe, one of those who accompanied Paul from Macedonia "as far as Asia."[1] (Acts xx. 4.) (*c*), Gaius of Corinth, "my host, and of the whole church." (Rom. xvi. 23.) "I thank God that I baptized none of you, save Crispus and Gaius." (1 Cor. i. 14.) With him Bishop Alexander thinks it not improbable that the Gaius of this epistle may be identified, on the ground, (1), That he was noted for hospitality; (2), That there were dissensions in the church to which he belonged, as there were in the church at Corinth. (1 Cor. i. 10–15; *Clem. Rom. to the Cors.*, sections 44–48.) (3), That they are identified by the synopsis of sacred Scripture ascribed to Athanasius.[2] But it is highly improbable that the aged apostle should have contemplated a journey to Corinth (2 John 10, 14), and the name Gaius was in common use.[3]

[1] Many authorities omit these words.

[2] *Speaker's Commentary*, Introduction to Third Epistle.

[3] One of this name is said to have been ordained Bishop of Pergamus by the apostle. (*Apostolic Constitutions*, vii. 46.)

The noble character of Gaius is indicated by the prayer of the apostle: "Beloved, I pray that in all things thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth." Elsewhere, in the letters of the New Testament, *grace and peace*, or, *grace, mercy, and peace*, as in Second John, are invoked. This is the only instance of apostolic salutation in which *temporal* blessings are asked, health and prosperity. John prays for Gaius that his body may be as healthful as his soul, that his circumstances may reflect his character. The words point to a far-reaching principle of the divine government, which here seems often to be suspended or baffled, but shall be vindicated hereafter. What men are determines what they have. Condition waits on character.

The letter is written to commend to the kindness of Gaius certain brethren, to whom he has already ministered, and who have now further need of his hospitality. "Brethren and strangers withal." Christ established a new relation of brotherhood, and men may be brethren in faith, though they be unknown by face. These men were evangelists,[1] itinerant preachers, missionaries sent out under the direction of the apostle to preach the gospel, and prepare the way for the settled pastor. "For the sake of the name they went forth," the name that is above every name. In the Old Testament, the word is employed to signify *the name of Jehovah*. (Lev. xxiv. 11, 16.) In the New Testament, *the name* is the name of Christ. (Acts v. 41, where the true reading is simply, as here, ὑπὲρ τοῦ ὀνόματος.) Similar is the use of *the way* (Acts ix. 2; xix. 9, 23; xxiv. 14, 22) for the Christian faith. (Compare *Ignat. Ephes.*, 3, Lightfoot's note; Euseb. *History*, v. 18.) In the spirit of Paul, they took nothing from the Gentiles,[2] unbelievers, lest they should give offence. Thus they were thrown upon the care of the church. The grace of hospitality is often commended in the New Testament. It springs naturally from

[1] The term evangelist occurs thrice only in the New Testament (Acts xxi. 8; Eph. iv. 11; 2 Tim. iv. 5), and has the meaning indicated above. (Compare Euseb. *History*. iii. 37.) The application of it to those by whom the Gospels were written is of later orgin. (Euseb. *History*, iii. 39.)

[2] Some render, *they went forth from the Gentiles, taking nothing*, cast out and stripped of all they had.

the relation which believers sustain toward one another as brethren in Christ, and in the early days of the church it played an important part in the furtherance of the gospel. In both these epistles its importance is recognized; to brethren it must be accorded, to false teachers it must be denied. John affirms that he had already written to the church, but his letter had been suppressed or disregarded by Diotrephes. That letter some suppose to be his first or second epistle. Certain authorities insert ἄν after ἔγραψα, and the Vulgate reads, *scripsissem forsitan*. But if few of the words of the Master have been preserved, it is not strange that many of the writings of the apostles have perished. Diotrephes was an officer or a man of commanding influence in the church. He not only refused to obey the word of the apostle and receive the brethren whom he commended, but them that would obey he cast out of the church. It is a strange picture. The authority of the last of the apostles is openly defied and resisted within the church. The enemies of Paul withstood him upon the ground that he was not one of the twelve, and had no right to the title of apostle. Now the authority of John is set at naught, the last of those who had seen Christ in the flesh. Diotrephes brought malicious charges against him, "prating against us with wicked words." Of the nature of these charges no intimation is given; but the motive that actuated his conduct is made plain, he "loveth to have the pre-eminence among them." The love of place and power is deeply imbedded in human nature. It was one of the sins for which Christ most sternly rebuked the Jews. (Matt. vi. 1–5, 16; xxiii. 1–12.) Repeatedly he warned his disciples against it (Matt. xviii. 1–4; Mark xiii. 38–40; Luke xiv. 7–11; John xiii. 12–17), yet all the weight of his authority and his example could not repress the spirit of ambition. The sons of Zebedee desired that they might sit one on his right hand and one on his left hand in his kingdom, and the ten when they heard it were moved with indignation. (Matt. xx. 20–28.) At the table on which were spread the emblems of his body and his blood, beneath the shadow of the cross, "there arose a contention among them, which of them is accounted to be greatest." (Luke xxii. 24.) The spirit of self-seeking

which John had once shared is now directed against himself. Diotrephes regarded the government of the church as his peculiar province, with which not even an apostle should be suffered to interfere. The epistle thus affords an early and striking instance of that spirit of ambition which has wrought such havoc in the history of the church. The most prolific source of schism is self-seeking.

Against Diotrephes John asserts his apostolic authority. As before in the realm of doctrine, so here in the realm of government, he claims the first place, and speaks with the calm consciousness of power, assured that his presence shall suffice to put his adversaries to shame. "If I come, I will bring to remembrance his works which he doeth."

In contrast with Diotrephes, Demetrius is commended. Bishop Alexander thinks that he may be identified with Demetrius, the silversmith of Ephesus (Acts xix. 24), but there is little to support the conjecture. He may have been sent with these brethren to convey the letter and act in the name of the apostle.[1] He is highly honored, having the witness of all men, of believers in general, and perhaps of "them that are without" (1 Tim. iii. 7); of the truth itself, to which his life was conformed, for "wisdom is justified of all her children" (Luke vii. 35); and of the apostle and those associated with him in the church.[2] Demetrius and Diotrephes are examples of the good that must be followed and the evil that must be shunned.

Much remains to be said, but writing has grown irksome to the old man, and this letter, like the second, concludes with the hope that "I" shall shortly "see thee, and we shall speak face to face," and with friendly salutations.

Thus these letters set before us a life-like portrait of the beloved disciple, sketched by his own hand, as his long life was drawing to a close. His anxious care of the churches, his personal regard

[1] In the *Apostolic Constitutions* (vii. 46) he is said to have been ordained bishop of Philadelphia by the apostle.

[2] John uses the term ἐκκλησία only in this epistle and in the Apocalypse, and always in the sense of a particular society of believers, never, as Paul, of the whole body of the faithful.

for the members of his flock, his love of the brethren, his firm grasp of truth, his zeal for righteousness, his abhorrence of falsehood, his watchful interest in the spread of the gospel, the decision with which he distinguishes between truth and error, his devotion to the name, his recognition of the absolute and all-embracing nature of the teaching of Christ, these are features of his character that stand out in bold relief. To draw near the disciple is to draw near the Master, and his lofty intuition, his tender emotion, his heavenly mindedness, his intense personal affection for his Lord, are destined to exercise a larger influence upon the theology and the life of the church. It is the element of personal love to Christ, which he supremely represents, that gives to Christianity its distinctive character and power.

Certain features of the life of the church, too, are portrayed. It has an established faith and polity, and is engaged in missionary labors, sending out and supporting evangelists. The first place in the local church has become an object of ambition. That there is no hint of persecution points to the reign of Nerva, or the early days of Trajan. The dangers that threaten lie within, and are the same that have marred the peace and unity and crippled the power of the church in every age, heresy and schism. The root of schism is personal ambition. Mark how soon heresy arose, how widely it spread, what fundamental doctrines it assailed. There is no deviation from the faith, no corruption of morals, which has stained the history of the church, that may not be traced to the days of the apostles. But over against error is set the truth, and over against self-seeking is set the might of love, and love and truth shall prevail, for Christ is the truth, and God is love.

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